

THE QUEEN OF BOHEMIA'S MIRROR

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Part One

Bořivoj of Bohemia married Rodeswith the daughter of Liutpold of Bavaria at the end of the second summer after his brother Venceslav was carried off in the flooding of the Vltava. The young bride, accompanied by her father and her brother Arnulf and a great host of Bavarian nobles and servants, set out from Regensburg, on the banks of the broad blue Donau, and crossing into Zapod České passed through Pilsen and on to meet with her groom at his stronghold of Prague. King Bořivoj awaited them surrounded not only by his own družhina of Bohemian princes but also by a multitude of guests from the Daleminzi and the Milizzi, and from Silesia, Little Poland and the Moravian lands. The feasting went on for a fortnight and it was said that never had so much food and drink been consumed at one gathering in all the wide České Žemé. They drank beer from the valleys, they drank mead from the hills and they drank dark wine from Carinthia and the plain of the Krajina.

Each morning the princes of Bavaria and Bohemia competed at feats of horsemanship dressed in all their finery astride richly caparisoned chargers before joining the

ladies for High Mass in the new church which was rising amidst a forest of scaffolding by the side of the royal palace. At the board they dined on partridge from the coverts of Bohemia's hill country, on pelicans from the shores of father Donau, and on peacocks from the gardens of the vlodykas. They dined on the beef of Pannonia, on the swine of Moravia and on the mutton of the Milizzi. Bořivoj toasted the rise of the Liutpoldings. Liutpold toasted the fall of the Carolings. Minstrels from Halicz sang of the deeds of the Drevlians. Master singers from the Rheinfeld praised the prowess of the Niebelungs. Bishops and priests poured down blessings upon both bride and groom.

At last, as August drew to a close, prince Arnulf leapt into his saddle and leading his father's horse to the happy Margrave bade him remember the duty he had to his people and the cares he had left behind west of the wald. As the Bavarians rode into the setting sun, and the other guests prepared for their leave taking, King Bořivoj looked down at his young wife and knew that, though the marriage had been contracted for the safety of his people, he had truly been rewarded with the fairest bride that ever had been seen in all the wide České Zemé.

Queen Rodeswith, notwithstanding her youth, soon learned to fulfil all her duties as the new lady of Prague. Though she had her Bavarian maids and her old nurse Hadui with her, and even a handful of her father's companions in arms, she made sure in those first months that she learnt the Slavonic tongue and that she became acquainted personally with all the domestics and menials who laboured in her husband's palace and for whom she was responsible. She made friends with Ljudmilla the cook, who taught her how to make currant jam, with Janek the butler, who taught her how to distinguish from which province each wine had been brought by subtle nuances of its bouquet, with Dunjaska the goose girl, who taught her how to tell when a mother has laid and how to pick up a gander without him breaking your arm, and with all the citizens of her little kingdom. She was stern with the steward and laughed with the laundry women. In October she went with the King to Hradec and in November they were at Jihlava on the Moravian march. At Christmas they were back at Prague and the snow came on the fourth day.

It was with the first snow that the royal physician, a Greek from Silistra, confirmed that Queen Rodeswith was with child.

"Are you certain of it Konstantin Konstantinou?" she asked, her face radiant with both health and excitement.

"There can be no doubt Lady Rodeswith, you are with child and in excellent health." He smiled and patted her hand, he was unable to accept that this sweet barbarian child was a queen.

"Then send the king to me, I must give him the news myself."

The doctor smiled again and nodding his compliance turned towards the door.

"No, wait!" Rodeswith shrieked, "Bertha, Másha, coil up my hair, I can't let him see me like this. Hildegard fetch another quilt, the Lombard one. Hadui, some rose water, please, for my face."

Konstantin Konstantinou chuckled to himself and waited patiently until all was prepared and the young Queen sat propped against the freshly puffed up pillows with an almost regal air of calm about her. Then at a nod from his lady he turned to seek the king.

Bořivoj, who had put off his morning's hunting in order to be at home when the doctor made his examination, had been unable to remain inactive and had taken his favourite mare around the perimeter of the stronghold's defences for exercise. He had just re-entered the palace forecourt when the physician emerged. The hot air rising from his mount's head and from the sweaty hide beneath the tooled and embroidered Polish saddle condensed into fine clouds in the frosty freshness of the morning and the horses iron shoes slithered on the icy cobbles of the yard. The king leapt to the ground and ran to the Greek.

Konstantin Konstantinou raised his left hand palm outwards to calm his Excellency and bowed stiffly from the waist.

The King tugged at his beard impatiently. "Well?" He asked as soon as the physician's eyes levelled with his own, "Will she live? What does she need?"

"It is my honour, Excellency," Konstantin Konstantinou savoured the moment, "to tell you that your wife is well indeed, and would receive you with great news."

Bořivoj clasped the doctor's shoulders in his huge horny hands and pulling him towards him kissed him on the mouth and as swiftly released him and rushed into the palace.

The groom holding the King's mare looked inquiringly at the doctor. "With child?" he asked softly.

The Greek uttered no words but his eyebrows signified the affirmative.

Indoors King Bořivoj danced around his wife's bed. He kissed all the maids and he wrapped the old nurse, Hadui, in so ferocious a bear hug that she believed her life's breath would be squeezed out of her. "God be praised," he cried, "and all the other gods too!" He stooped to hug and kiss his queen but held himself back inches from her body. Helplessly conscious for the first time of the fragility of this vessel within which was cradled his posterity he opened and closed his mouth and he clenched and unclenched his hands in agonised ecstasy. The maids laughed and cried and old Hadui caught him by the arms and pulled and pushed him out of the room scolding all the while in the Niemcy tongue, of which, this day, he understood not a word.

From that moment forth the King insisted that his young wife should stay calm and not exert herself. He banned her from chasing the geese with Dunjaska. He forbade her to milk the cows with Leka and Rinka. He ordered that she should desist from hanging the tapestries in the banqueting hall with Stenka and Ralnikin. But Rodeswith's life was not too dull. Old Hadui reminded her of her girlhood pleasure at needlework and the King sent her a woman of the Huns skilled in the working of felt and a Saracen girl from Vlahu skilled in the mysteries of silks. She sat by the window wrapped in a Saxon shawl surrounded by her maids and sewed and span and thought of everything that her child would need as she watched the winter's pageant passing before her in the open spaces of the stronghold.

One afternoon as she sat embroidering a tiny boot for the coming child she was startled by an embassy from Arpad King of the Huns which galloped wildly into the courtyard after the fashion of their countrymen. In the moment in which she looked up at the curious figures on their shaggy ponies she foolishly thrust her needle into her finger. On looking down she saw the trickle of blood upon her pale hand and leaning forward wiped it on the fresh snow that had settled on the window's ebony frame, which some said was the greatest curiosity in all the palace of Prague, so rare was the dark wood North of the Alps.

"I wish," she said dreamily to her companions, "that when my son is born he will have hair as raven black as this window frame, skin as soft and white as the new fallen snow and lips and cheeks as red as the blood of my body." She smiled and Másha leant forward and taking her by the wrist kissed away the last of the blood from her wound. Old Hadui turned to the figure of the Virgin that hung above the stove and mouthed a silent prayer.

But all did not go well that winter. In the cold of January the Huns bore down on Carinthia and King Bořivoj led his grumbling družina to the succour of his brother-in-law Arnulf. The Queen was vexed for her husband's safety. She fretted for his long ride in the deepening snows, across the frozen Donau and beyond the high mountains of Styria. Who could dream of what terrors he might face. When she had first been brought, a child herself, to his bed the past August she had been horrified by this red faced bearded giant, at least as old as her father, who smelt of onions and the lather of horses, but his simple devotion to duty, his good-heartedness to all and above all his adoration of herself had won Rodeswith around. And now he had left her alone, and in her condition!

And worse still befell the young Queen. Towards the end of February the cold retreated somewhat and the palace was opened up for airing and the stoves and hearths raked out. Then suddenly one afternoon in the midst of all these tasks the wind changed and a biting gale tore down from the direction of Silesia. Rodeswith had all the fires re-lit immediately but in such conditions the great new timber palace took its time warming up. Her old nurse, Hadui, who that afternoon had been helping the laundry women down by the Vltava, caught a chill and took to her bed.

The chill grew into a fever and despite the constant nursing and attendance of her mistress the faithful Hadui was dead before the second week was half done.

The daughter of Liutpold was devastated. Old Hadui had been her last link with her childhood world and it seemed that only now she realised how far away she was from all that. The towers of Regensburg and the manors and minsters of the Bavarian Land seemed like something out of a Märchen. Her heart hardened against the cold country of the Slavs. To make matters worse she was beginning to feel the weight of the child. She gazed into the mirror left to her by her grandmother Hülde and saw how her cheeks had lost their rosy hew and how her long brown hair was pale and stringy and her eyes grown red from crying; you are no longer the fairest bride in Bohemia it told her. The weight she carried was oppressive and she noticed that the younger družynniks no longer flirted with her when she held court.

In the last week of March the King returned from the South bringing the fine weather with him. For a brief while this brought respite to her suffering. At the return of its lord and his companions all Prague became a bustling hive of frenetic activity. Rents were brought in from the outlying farms, fresh horses arrived at the stronghold to replace those worn out by the winter war and the palace was packed with plaintiffs. To all this excitement was added the news that Bořivoj brought to his wife of her brother Arnulf, who, it seemed, had finally become the hero he had always dreamt of being.

There was one weight, however, that could not be lifted from the young queen's burden and this came between her and her husband. For although King Bořivoj still loved his wife dearly and loved his unborn son even more he felt unable to come near to her. It was not that he found her unattractive. Though Rodeswith herself would never have believed it, he still knew her, for certain, to be the fairest in all the wide České Zemé. And yet, somehow, he felt that his great clumsy soldiering self could not be trusted to be too close to such a delicate creature. He was terrified in his simple way that even by breathing too hard in his wife's presence he might somehow hurt their unborn child. But this he could never tell her and she could never guess, so, though he came to speak with

his wife each day, he satisfied the needs of his flesh with a peasant woman who managed one of his farms at Modrany.

Though spring brings light and happiness to the world, in this year it brought no such relief to Queen Rodeswith. Watching the servants and peasants larking and laughing at the work from which she was prohibited from joining in and seeing the družynniks matching their horses against one another in the meadow before the stronghold or returning flushed from the chase, noticing the poorly hidden glances exchanged by Másha and Stenka whose lives were only just beginning made her feel more deeply that her own was at an end. The one thought that she could occasionally summon up to console herself was that of the day when slim and beautiful once again she could place the son he had always wanted on her husband's knee in the presence of all the vlodykas of the wide České Žemé. But that seemed so far off now and her burden bore so heavily upon her.

Spring turned to summer and the green on the land deepened. King Bořivoj gathered his družina about him and rode down into the Moravian lands, once more to face wild Arpad. May became June and the humming of insects and the singing of larks was heard throughout the vale of the Vltava. Rodeswith sweated and struggled with her greatness and, at long last, was confined.

It was the hottest week of the year, even the hornets sought out the shade. Konstantin Konstantinou soaked his shirt in sweat as he sat by the Queen's bed. She herself wore only the lightest of shifts and was covered by only a thin sheet of muslin, yet still the mattress dripped with her perspiration. Embarrassed by his lady's nakedness the doctor would not have been there were it not for the King's specific instructions. There were to be no complications at this birth, and, against all advice and tradition, the king had insisted that Greek doctor should oversee the midwives. The contractions came and went and came and went, growing and growing in intensity. The pain racked through Rodeswith's body, tearing at her shoulders, her heart, the small of her back and ripping them down into the pit of her stomach, never giving her an instant to catch her breath. She writhed and jerked and knotted the sheet until Hildegard removed it leaving her in her sodden clinging shift.

"Please!" she screamed, and "Please!", until Ljudmilla the cook came and held a gag across her mouth.

She kicked and kicked and could kick no more. For two hours the labour continued, for four hours it went on, for eight it kept up and then for eighteen. Throughout the life long day she was broken on the rack of her own womanhood and all through the short summer night which seemed a year or more in length. Konstantin Konstantinou had ministered to the refuse of the battlefield and to those maimed by the justice of his own emperor but nothing could have prepared him for this torture. He found this abysmal vigil so harrowing that he was no longer able to feel compassion for this twisting jerking gagged thing that had once been a queen.

When the sun hung low over the road to Plzen at the end of the second day the baby finally tore its way into the world. The mid-wife caught it by one leg, raised it, slapped it, and bore it bawling out of the room. The once woman bled. On her shift and on her legs. On the mattress and on the floor. She bled and she bled. For three whole hours she bled. First shivering and gasping for breath and then weak from her exertion and from loss of blood she passed into a fitful faint, but all the time she bled.

The fainting and the fever, she had caught a chill with the cooling of her own perspiration, stayed with Queen Rodeswith, for she lived on, for four days. She awoke in the morning and feebly opening her eyes she saw Másha and Stenka sitting hand in hand by her bedside. Too weak and relieved to resent them now she smiled softly. Másha bent down and kissed her on the mouth and Stenka galloped out of the room in search of Konstantin Konstantinou.

Rodeswith pushed her hand onto the maid's arm and tried her voice; faintly, indeed barely audibly, it came, "Másha?"

Másha lifted her lady's hand to her mouth and kissed it again and again, "Darling Queenchen." she whispered almost as softly as her mistress had done.

The Greek physician was certain of it, Queen Rodeswith would bear no more children. If this child had been a boy then no news could have pleased her more. But all that for a girl? What good was a barren boyless Queen to the King of Bohemia? She dreaded the return of Bořivoj from the

summer's campaign, and caught herself hoping he might fall to a Hunnish arrow. Widowhood would be more honourable than repudiation. Then she saw him lying cold in the long grass of a Moravian meadow, the dew settling on his hoary beard, and despised herself. Still, she would not see the child.

After a week she arose from her sick bed. Bertha and Másha spent a whole morning preening and dressing her, fussing like children over a favourite doll that was lost and yet now is found again. Their laughing and their pinching and their kissing almost made her feel like a girl again. But not quite. When they were satisfied with their work she sent them away. Alone she paused, one hand on the foot of the royal bed, then she walked across to the window.

Before her stretched Prague and the plain of the Vltava. The heart and the carotid of all the wide České Žemé. No, she would stay here. This was her country. She was the Queen of Bohemia. She fastened the high collar of her Hunnish jacket, she could feel her breasts now firm and full within it, pinched her cheeks and arched her eyebrows. Tilting her head back she turned into the room and crossed the Pecheneg carpets to where her grandmother's mirror hung upon the wall.

Yes, it told her, you are still the fairest in all the land. She span on her heel and strode defiantly out of her chamber and into the great hall.

The družynniks leapt hastily to their feet but she looked at no one before she had seated herself, straight-backed, in the high seat. Then she turned to the steward. "Have my physician sent for." she commanded him. Whilst she waited for the Greek to be brought before her she scanned the faces in the Hall. All eyes were on her. Her glance rested for a moment on the young son of an important vlodyka. This youth had been outrageously familiar with her before her illness, but once her burden had become apparent he had spent the rest of the winter bear hunting and the spring training his sakers. Now, seeing her rejuvenated, he grinned roguishly. She cut him cold and relished his discomfiture and humiliation.

"Konstantin Konstantinou," she began when the physician stood before her, "We recognise the service you have done us," she smiled at him, but it was not the smile of the girl he had

examined at Christmas time, "and know that no reward can truly match it. We will, however, offer you what little we have to give," she indicated the main doors of the hall where grooms stood with three white horses, one richly saddled and harnessed and the other two weighed down with pannions full of furs and silks, "and would ask of you one last favour."

"Speak your Excellency, your wish is my command." Konstantin Konstantinou knew this to be a different woman to the one he had watched sink into Hell.

"Our sister, Konstantin Konstantinou, the wife to our brother Arnulf, is expected to enter her confinement in six or eight weeks time, and knowing from our own experience of your expertise in these matters nothing would give us greater confidence in the outcome of her condition than the knowledge that you were in attendance. Would you grant us this indulgence?"

"Nothing, my Lady, would give me greater pleasure." He bowed from his waist in that peculiar fashion which he had.

"Thank you," she smiled as warmly as she could, "Before you leave Prague we will send you a personal communication for my brother, if that would not trouble you?" She could not allow this physician ever to return to Bohemia.

"Not in the least." he smiled, pre-occupied with his worries for the baby girl, and bowed once more.

And so the days passed. July, breezier than June but no less sunny, was a good time. Rodeswith spent the days repairing her beauty, winning back the love of her household, which was easily done since, though she would not believe it, it had never been lost, and learning to take the reins of her kingdom. The girl child she avoided as best she could. It spent its time with Dunjaska, the goose girl, who had lost her own little boy to heat-stroke at the beginning of June and whose breasts were still overflowing. This was the one dark spot in the young Queen's life during these days. Dunjaska had been a good friend, and now, because of this monster which had barged, uninvited, into their lives, she could hardly see her. But Rodeswith was not a bitter woman and did not take these vexations out on her friends or dependants.

Well after supper on the first Saturday in August, when the Queen had already changed into her shift, ready for bed, and called Másha in to comb her hair out an outrider galloped up to the stronghold. The girls listened to the watchman call his challenge but could not make out the reply. When they heard his eager response, however, and his frantic command for the gate to be opened they knew that it must be something of import and leapt from the bed to the window. A družynnik well known to them both as Bořivoj's shield bearer rode into the open space. Másha barely had time to throw a cloak over her mistress's shoulders as she rushed to the door and ran barefooted out into the courtyard to catch the horseman's bridle.

It was good news after all. The King and his companions would be back in Prague in time for Mass the next morning. The campaigning had gone well with some losses but more gains and many of the Moravian vlodykas, grateful for their deliverance, had promised to come up to Prague as soon as the harvest was in.

The Queen immediately sent messengers out to the farms to fetch provisions for the festivities, and, in a moment of magnanimity that surprised even herself she went so far as to send a special messenger to the farm at Modrany to give the stewardess there the good news. Then she took her husband's shield bearer into the great hall and sitting him next to her on the high seat, made him relate which of her friends and neighbours had lost sons or been widowed so that she might make sure that they were not forgotten in the general merriment on the morrow. Eventually the messenger, who had been riding all day and all night, fell asleep on her shoulder, and Másha dragged her queen, protesting, off to bed.

The next morning Queen Rodeswith was arrayed in all her finery, and truly beautiful. She was no longer just the darling child who had set out from Regensburg a year before, but was now a woman in her prime, filled out and confident. She was standing out on the porch surrounded by her ladies and her družynniks when the King and his company rode in through the gates of the stronghold. Bořivoj stared down at her for a moment, almost as if he failed to recognise her. She stepped down

into the dust, the Queen of all the wide České Žemé, where a few hours before she had stood unshod in a simple shift, and once again took the bridle, this time of her husband's horse.

He slid from his saddle and fell on his knees before her, and taking her hands in his kissed them, "I dreamt you were dead." he whispered.

She smiled and raised him up. They kissed mouth to mouth. The formal kiss of peace, for the people to see, but there was so much more to it than that.

"And the child?"

She winced slightly and tensed, preparing herself for the reproach, "A girl, I'm sorry, next time....", but she could not finish for he had kissed her again, and this time with no pretence at formality.

Releasing her mouth he caught up her hand and almost wrenched her arm out of its socket as he ran towards the palace, "Show me my daughter!" he roared to the servants.

Rodeswith had not foreseen this eventuality and for a moment was gripped with terror. Luckily, however, the cook, Ljudmilla, had known what to expect, and there in the great hall stood Dunjaska in borrowed shawl and slippers cradling the little princess in her arms.

As King Bořivoj timidly approach his first acknowledged child his wife hung back gripped by a certain horror. The fact that this creature which had caused her so much suffering and forced her into deceiving her husband, and worse, God help her, now seemed so small and helpless only served to increase the sense of repulsion she felt for it. Why had she been cursed so?

And so the stronghold of Prague settled down to the routine of late summer. The gathering of the harvest, the receiving of tribute and foreign embassies, and the horse fairs. Dunjaska was brought into the royal apartments to live, and though she missed her ganders dreadfully she loved her fosterling as she could never have loved her own son, the short lived fruit of an unwelcome encounter with a drunken farrier. The little princess was truly beautiful in a way that few babies really are. Her skin was a white as freshly fallen snow, her cheeks red with the rush of blood, and her hair as dark as..., well, as dark as the window frame in the Queen's bower at which Dunjaska usually sat when she fed her charge.

Queen Rodeswith rarely had time to sit in her bower anymore. When she wasn't dispensing justice with her husband the King in the great hall, or visiting the local farms to check up on the stewards, she was in the royal bedchamber with Másha and Bertha making sure that she looked her best for the people. The King was unhappy that she could not make more time for their daughter but appreciated the virtue of putting public duty before private pleasure. He himself, however, more than made up for this neglect, spending every spare moment of the day with his child. Never was a girl more loved or doted on by her father than was this little princess.

Part Two

And so the years passed and the little princess grew up along the banks of the Vltava loved, like her mother, by all the people of Bohemia. As soon as she had learned to walk a little Dunjaska took her out into the yard to make friends with all the geese and to teach her not to be afraid of the ducks and the chickens. Ljudmilla, the cook, sat her on the big oak table in the middle of the kitchen and set her to podding peas. Stenka sat her on his shoulders and carried her up to the pinnacle of the lookout tower that stood by the main gate and pointed out and named for her all the hills and villages that ringed the river plain. He told her, too, how the different tribes throughout all the wide České Žemé had been brought together into one just and peaceful community through the labours of her father King Bořivoj.

And as the little princess grew up the folk who dwelt in Prague and the surrounding country thought all the more of the wisdom of King Bořivoj in his alliance with the Liutpoldings which had not only saved their western marches from the ravages of war these last few years but had brought to them two matchless royal ladies such as no people before had ever had to watch over them. Even in her babyhood the child had shown that she possessed the virtues of her mother, Queen Rodeswith. Never did she begrudge the attention paid to the other children of the stronghold or demand special treatment, though of course that was lavished on her unasked. She always respected the old and infirm whatever their station in life, and was ever ready to share whatever she might be given with any company she found herself in.

On one occasion, when she was but three years of age and playing in the dust of the yard, an old woman, no one but a peasant's widow, limped into the open space of the stronghold leaning on a crooked old staff and sat down, exhausted, by the water trough. This misshapen old hag, whom

most children would have taken for a witch, had walked all the way from Nehvizdy, to complain to the King and Queen of her neighbour who persistently allowed his milch cow to wander into her vegetable patch. The local vlodyka had been no help since the man was his cousin, and he himself had an interest in the guilty cow. Now when the princess saw this haggard crone she did not run and hide behind Dunjaska's skirts as any normal girl might have done but immediately went up to the trough and filling the drinking bowl handed it to the old woman as she might have to her own grandmother. The old peasant woman, not knowing the child, thanked her gently and gave her in return a dry and crumbling fragment of stale rye cake. Now the little princess, who ate honey twice a day, might easily have cast such a meagre scrap aside for the fowls yet even at her tender age she understood that from this woman it was a generous gift, so, nibbling a corner of the cake to show her appreciation, she placed the rest of it in the little pouch which hung around her neck containing a miniature ikon and the long hairs that her father had pulled from the tail of his white mare.

The high point of each of his daughter's days was when King Bořivoj left his judgement seat and stepping out in to sunlight called for his horse and lifting his daughter onto the saddle before him rode out for his morning's exercise. First they would ride around the defences of the stronghold and look to see that the ditch was not being filled with rubbish and that the fence stood firm. Then they would ride down to the river bank and watch the washer women at work and then follow the stream down away from the stronghold. King Bořivoj pointed out to his daughter the fish weirs and the peasant boats made from burnt out tree trunks. Here they would see wild ducks, smaller and darker than those that lived with Dunjaska's geese, and herons and sometimes even, on the further bank, a family of cranes. On certain days when her father tired of sitting in judgement they would ride farther up stream and then up onto the slopes of Modrany where she would be allowed to rock her little brother Spytignev in his cradle whilst the King discussed farming with the stewardess.

One other time of the day was special to the little princess. That last hour when she and Dunjaska had eaten their supper and her nurse, having put her to bed, went to help Ljudmilla, the cook, prepare the repast for the King's table.. Then Másha would come to her, in the dark, and sit

with her until she fell asleep, telling in a soft ecstatic voice of all the wonderful, brave and wise and saintly things her mother, the Queen, had said and done during the day. Sometimes as she lay there drowsily listening to the love in Másha's voice she found herself wishing that they could be like other families and that she could talk to her mother and be held by her, but deep down inside of her heart she knew that she was proud to be different and to live to serve. Maybe serving women, like Másha and Ljudmilla, had time to waste playing with children but people like her mother and herself, for she too would be a queen in some foreign land one day, had no time for idle pleasures but must labour every moment of every day for the good of all.

As she grew older the daily rounds of the King's daughter took her further from the stronghold and out into the countryside. On these excursions she and Dunjaska would usually be accompanied by Stenka or Rastislav. They would go down to the water meadows and sitting under the stunted willows, polled for wickets, they would watch the peasant boys hunting for fish, or wait quietly for the green and black water snakes to come sliding up out of their weed covered pools to take the choice eggs that the country wives left out for them. Dunjaska made her little charge swear solemnly that she would not tell Father Kaich that they did this.

There was a roguish old Bulgar musician who used to come up to the stronghold from time to time with his dancing bear, who proved a great favourite with the royal child. One day he came up to look for his little friend without bringing the bear with him. He told her that he had a new little bear cub which he intended to teach to dance and asked her if she would like to come down to the camp of the travelling people to see it. The child was quite overcome at the prospect of playing with a little bear cub and begged and begged Dunjaska to let them go. The nurse maid was not very comfortable at first about trusting her charge with the travelling people, but eventually, having persuaded both Stenka and Rastislav to accompany them they set off down the valley.

The old Bulgar was staying in the strange village of tents that came and went from the bend of the Vltava about a mile north of Prague. It was inhabited by a motley collection of nomads

who had put themselves under the protection of the King of Bohemia. There were Bulgars and there were Avars, and there were even renegade Huns and a handful of Slavic good for nothings who had run off from their zadrugas. There were women in the camp also, but they were for the most part Bohemians and Moravians. The child had never visited such a strange place before. The tents were low slung and dark and the wild looking horsemen wore strange clothes and had curious puckered up faces that made them look more like goblins than men. The little girl was fascinated by the foreignness of it all, the sights, the sounds, and the smells. When they finally reached the old musicians tent she was spellbound by the little bear. Whilst the Moravian woman who looked after the bear charmer watered down some yoghurt for their guests, it was a hot day on the Bohemian plain, the little girl wrestled with the cub and tickled his stomach when he rolled over. Dunjaska leant forward on her knees ready to snatch her ward away should the beast bite and the Bulgar laughed at her saying that he had a worse bite himself. The Moravian didn't seem to like it when he said this and frowning at the musician engaged Dunjaska in a conversation about the problems of bringing up children.

"How will you teach him to dance?" asked the princess as the little animal hung by its mouth from her clenched fist.

"Well Gospcka, I'll show you now, shall I?" He grinned his scar faced grin as he drawled playfully in his barbarous accent.

"Please, do!" she cried.

The musician caught the young animal by the scruff and carried it across to a cage that stood open nearby. Placing it inside and latching the door he disappeared for a moment behind the tent. The cage was solidly built with bars of oak and a brass floor. It stood a little of the ground on four blackened stones. When the Bulgar reappeared he was carrying a bundle of brush wood and lighting a few sticks from the cooking hearth placed them under the cage. Then he took his flute out of the front of his shirt and began to play. Softly and quietly he played at first, but then as the pile of twigs burned higher and brighter he played faster and louder. The bear cub began to dance. At first he just shifted himself about awkwardly and with little sense of balance, but as the music became wilder so he leapt from one foot to another each movement more frenetic and inspired than the next.

For a few moments the little princess was captivated, but then she realised what was really happening. Her jaw dropped open and she stared in horror as she saw the brass floor begin to change colour. A moment later she seized the bowl of curds and poured them onto the fire.

Turning to the old musician, who had stopped playing in surprise she stared at him for a moment before bursting into tears and running off through the tents. Dunjaska ran after her and Stenka ran after them both. Rastislav, who made a point of never running anywhere, stayed for a few moments and exchanged a word or two with the Bulgar about the capriciousness of children before leaving the old man with a Frankish coin and sauntering back towards the stronghold with all the airs of one who wishes the people to know that he has the King's confidence.

That night the King's daughter cried all through her supper, and hardly ate a thing. She was hungry but she just couldn't bear the thought of gratifying her own selfish wants when others, like the little bear, had to suffer so sorely. It was only when Másha came, after she had gone to bed, and brought her some bacon rind and turnip ends that the Queen had left over from her luncheon that she got her appetite back. The next day she was still feeling sad, for when sorrow is first encountered it is harder to overcome, and the princess had never really felt sorrow before. During the morning Mass Father Kaich noticed the solemn face on the usually cheerful cherub, and the wrinkled little brow during the silent moment he allowed for private prayer. After the service, when he had removed his vestments and finished off the wine he found her sitting in the porch of the Church apparently deep in some private conversation with the ikon of the Virgin that hung over the door. It was only recently that the child had learnt, he reflected, that this was not a portrait of her own mother, and he knew that, understandably, she still confused the Queens of Heaven and Bohemia. He took her up in his arms and kissed her forehead. She had not yet learnt to distinguish the grape from the bouquet as her mother could but she was in no doubt that the good father had had more than the one sip of the wine she had seen him take during the Mass.

Father Kaich knew better than to try and force the child to talk of her troubles, and he knew also that she had reached that age when the young first discover that they do not dwell in Eden,

the Little Fall he called it. But at least, he thought to himself, he could show her that love was still possible and that there was a promise of a better life to come. So calling for his horse to be brought to him he set the child on his saddlebow and, with Dunjaska at his stirrup, rode out to Levy Hradec. This was the fortress north of Prague where he had first been sent to serve Bořivoj, before the king had married Queen Rodeswith or brought under his rule all the wide České Žemé.

At the old fortress, where King Bořivoj still sometimes held councils, for Prague was too full of foreigners to be safe from spies, the priest held a second communion. After this service he took the King's daughter to the front of the church and showed her the relics of Saint Clement of Rome which the holy Bishop Methodi had brought all the way from the land of the Greeks. Then they went outside and sat on the rampart of the fortress and lunched on white cheese and rye bread, and on gooseberries and radishes and he told her all about how the Good News had first been brought to the wide České Žemé from Moravia at her father's bidding. And he told, also, how now, each summer, her father must try and repay his debt to the Moravian people by leading his družina down into their valleys to fight wild Arpad and his pagan Huns. And he told how though life often seemed hard for those chosen to bear the burden of heavy duties there was a just reward at the end, and how, if she worked hard and followed the example of her parents, she too might one day help to save a whole nation from the clutches of the Devil.

From the time of her return from the day spent with Father Kaich at Levy Hradec the daughter of King Bořivoj became a far more serious child. She paid more attention to the work of her parents, though what her mother did she learnt only from report for accident rarely allowed their paths to cross. She listened to the complaints of the poor and she paid attention to the reports of the war. She learned her mother's Niemcy tongue, from Bertha, and Latin from Father Kaich. She paid attention to the way that Janek and Ljudmilla managed the affairs of the palace and she visited as many of the royal farms as she might. She persuaded her father, the King, to bring Spytignev from Modrany so that he might grow up amongst the družynniks, for it worried her that her parents had no son. In short, though still a small child, she did all in her power to prepare for the time when she

might herself become a queen, and the people of all the wide České Zeme grew to love her as they loved her mother. And so the years passed by.

Part Three

Through the years of her daughter's childhood Queen Rodeswith continued to secure her place in the lives and hearts of her people. She worked ceaselessly to improve the economy of King Bořivoj's establishment, and Janek the butler and Ljudmilla the cook could hardly believe that they had ever managed without her. For the first month after her daughter's birth she personally attended to the geese Dunjaska had been forced to desert until a suitable replacement had been found and fetched from one of the farms.

The Queen's Bavarian education at the episcopal schools of Salzburg and Passau made her an ideal helpmate to Father Kaich in his arduous task of bringing the wide České Žemé into the family of Christendom. Together they taught the sons and daughters of the Bohemian princes their Creeds and prepared them for baptism, he in the Moravian fashion and she in the Frankish.

Rodeswith's life was so bound up in the construction and furnishing of the new church being built for the Virgin within the stronghold that many of the old wives coming up to Prague from out of the country assumed, like her little daughter, that she was the Holy Lady it honoured. They would fall down in the dust at her feet and kiss the hem of her skirts muttering "Gospá Sveta, Gospá Sveta," and she would laugh and, lifting them to their feet, kiss them on both cheeks and take them into her bower. There they would spin together over cakes and ale, and she would ask to hear of their children and grandchildren, and beg them to tell if their husbands treated them well and if the vlodykas in their villages were just men. When they left they would kiss her on

the cheek and mutter to one another, "Poor woman, so kind yet with only a single child, and that a girl!

Queen Rodeswith became more familiar with all of her husband's družynniks, learning from each of them of the names and estates of his lineage and of how he had come to ride in company with the King. Many came from the lands that surrounded Prague on the middle Vltava and these she persuaded to take her home with them from time to time so that she might visit and befriend their mothers and sisters. The task which she had privately set herself, and which she knew she would never complete, was to learn the name and nature of each and every soul, both free and unfree, in all the wide České Žemé.

She visited the King's own farms and sent to her father at Regensburg for craftsmen who would fashion ploughs after the Frankish style, so that the peasants might toil less for greater fruitfulness. She made her husband and his družina promise to bring back the biggest of the bulls of Pannonia that they might come across when they rode against the Huns so that they might serve the Bohemian heifers. In return she and her women wove great tapestries for the walls of the hall showing the humbling of wild Arpad and the triumphs of King Bořivoj and Prince Arnulf. And when Vojtech of Libice was slain in the deep valleys of Moravia Rodeswith sat weaving with Másha and Bertha day and night without pause until they had depicted a scene of his heroic stand which they could send to his mother and widow.

When the boy child Spytignev was first brought to the stronghold the Queen was mortified, the more so when Father Kaich revealed to her that it had been done at the request of her own daughter. Within a few days, however, she realised that this apparent humiliation was in fact a great reward. The guilty secret of her barrenness must long since have become clear to the King and she had lived in dread of being set aside to make way for a new queen capable of bearing sons. Yet now, if King Bořivoj recognised the bastard Spytignev, she had nothing to fear. The Bavarian alliance was far too valuable to be set aside for the sake of a peasant woman. Within a few weeks Rodeswith had become so taken with this idea that she began to make regular trips to Modrany to let

the boy's mother know how her child was taking to life at the court. The stewardess at Modrany, for her part, soon became one of the Queen's firmest friends and most useful informants on the state of Bohemia's woods and fields. Spytignev himself, along with his playmate Viteslav Vojtech's son, she learned to love as if they were her own, and they, for their part, idolised her almost as much as they did his sister.

The little princess herself she continued to avoid. The very sight of her brought back all those feelings of pain, self loathing and guilt that she had felt around the time of her confinement. She made every effort to arrange her own day so that she might not come across the child, which was difficult within the confines of a stronghold like Prague, but she was not a cruel woman and when she did occasionally find herself confronted with that angelic little black and white face she bestowed upon it the smile that she practised, for just such occasions, in grandmother Hülde's mirror. It was the smile that one might give to a child awaiting its first communion. It said, "I am pleased with you, you are doing so well, now don't spoil it all by acting like a little child!"

One summer Queen Rodeswith's younger brother Berthold appeared at the stronghold of Prague leading a company of Bavarian Freiherren. In the tradition of younger sons he sought to win his arms in the service of a foreign lord, and was to ride out against wild Arpad and his pack of Huns with King Bořivoj. The time of his arrival coincided with the levying of the summer host and was taken up with military and diplomatic formalities, but returning from the fields of war Prince Berthold spent more time with his new friends and family at Prague. He was particularly taken with his little niece and took to riding everywhere with her on his saddlebow.

On one occasion, during Berthold's visit, the Queen, knowing her daughter to be receiving instruction from Janek on the storage of perishables, sought out her brother's company. She found him in the kitchen asking Ljudmilla about the rich dark plum jam that was a special delicacy of the Bohemian court. Ljudmilla spoke no Niemcy and Berthold only soldier's Slavonic, which was not much use in the discussion of preserves, so the conversation passed through the medium of Bertha the maid. Bertha and Berthold were friends of old, when both were small

children she had first taught him to walk. Rodeswith stood in the doorway noted by her brother but by neither of the women. She was amused, understanding both tongues fluently, by Bertha's translation of the respectful tones in which the cook addressed the Bavarian prince into the gently teasing ones which were more suited to the great hearted oaf she knew him to be. The Queen wondered if her brother was aware of the subtle process taking place, or whether he would return to Regensburg with tales of how the palace was terrorised by an upstart peasant woman. She listened more carefully to the conversation. Ljudmilla was explaining to Prince Berthold that there were at present only two pots of povidl left in the pantry, one made by her Excellency's hand... Berthold raised an eyebrow in his sister's direction... and one prepared, with some help, by the little Excellency. Berthold said something softly and rapidly to Bertha who giggled and ran across to the pantry door. A moment later she returned burdened down by two earthenware jars.

The cook looked at the Bavarian inquiringly, "Your honour wishes to taste which is best?" she asked.

Rodeswith left the room before Bertha had had a chance to translate the innocent query.

"Why must they always compare me to her?" she asked herself bitterly, "I do my best to be all they could want of me, isn't that enough? Why must she always be held before me like a mirror?"

She sat down on the back porch with her chin resting on her hands and watched the geese rooting around in the chickweed. She felt all churned up inside, and knowing that it was stupid, and evil too, she grew all the more angry with herself.

Másha came out onto the porch and sitting down next to her put her arm around her. Her mistress continued to pout at the geese without acknowledging her presence.

"Come along Queenchen," she gave a little squeeze, "don't sulk."

Rodeswith remained frozen in her attitude.

Mášha leant over and, resting her chin on the Queen's upper arm, softly kissed the shoulder of her dress, "Please?" she implored, retaining her pose and gazing up at Rodeswith from under her eyelids, her mouth held open in a half kiss.

The Queen could bear it no longer and, a great shudder running through her body, she burst into tears. Másha threw both arms about her protectively and rocked her gently back and forth as she was wracked by heavy sobs. "He's *my* brother," she eventually wailed through her tears, "I haven't seen him in years," she gasped for breath, "and now that he is here he wastes all his time with other people." She could not say which other person she was particularly jealous of for she knew her crime to be so heinous that even her Másha might find it unforgivable.

The good maid servant waited until the worst of the tears had passed before raising her mistress up and leading her to her chamber. She told Stenka to put it about that the Queen had been taken sick and should not be disturbed and, returning to her mistress, undressed her and took her to bed. As she lay there cradling that dear brown head against her breast she thought to herself that if things were going to progress after this fashion she might find herself going to Dunjaska to learn how nursemaids coped.

For the rest of his visit Prince Berthold paid his sister far more attention, though he had not, in truth, neglected her before. They went riding in the country every day and she introduced him to all her favourite dairy cows and showed him the best spots for fishing along the banks of the Vltava, and in the evenings they sat next to each other in the seat of honour in the hall. It did not give her complete satisfaction, however, for she guessed that Másha had told Bertha of her complaint and that she had found some way of intimating it to her brother. She had wanted love not charity. Father Kaich would tell her, she knew, that in a true believer the two could not be separated, but this thought brought her little comfort. And then September was on them again and Berthold returned to Bavaria knowing that his father had agreed that he should spend Christmas with the Král Arnulf, his brother's godfather, in the West.

The leaves changed colour many times in the woods of Bohemia and the grain was gathered in from her fields as often. Winter approached again. The bear sought his bed and the squirrel laid up his store of nuts. The cranes came together in great flocks and rose up from the water meadows of the Vltava to fly to the South, whither who could tell. The frogs and newts on which they had feasted the summer long sank into slumber under stones or on the muddy bottoms of the leaf strewn ponds. The green and black water snakes too were gone, and with them went the prosperity of the land. The peasants piled up the fire wood behind their little houses and high in the mountains that bounded the wide České Žemé the gaunt grey wolves called to one another, yearning for the thrill of the chase, and the slaking of their fearful thirst. That time would come.

November came and with it early snows. It was the eleventh winter of her daughter's sojourn in this world and the twenty sixth of Queen Rodeswith's. Her yearlings were slaughtered, her pork salted, her stores full and her people sound. The snow crunched under her felt boots as the Queen of Bohemia strode across the open space of the stronghold. She liked this dry cold. It brought the colour to her cheeks and the freshness kept her awake and alive to all around her.

This day her husband held court. As always the družynniks kept the hall clear of all save the vlodykas, important guests and the principals in each case. The bulk of the people who came to court, peasants from the outlying districts, crowded about the main doors to the hall which, even in this bitter weather, were kept open wide. The Queen moved about amongst her people, directing the aged or infirm to await their call in the kitchen. The children danced around her as she handed them sweetmeats and pickles she kept in the pouch that hung from her belt and made sure that what little clothing they had was wrapped about them as warmly as possible.

Father Kaich, watching from the porch of the Lady Church, and who was a little bit in love with her himself, wondered at how she could be such a good mother to so many of the Bohemian people, to whom she had come as a foreigner, and yet, at the same time, neglect the child of her own flesh so. Was it really, as they all conspired to tell the child, that she put her sense of duty before her own feelings or was it due to some unnatural lack of feeling. He had talked this over

many times with his own wife, but they could never agree on an explanation of this paradox, though both could see that her inability to bear sons hurt the Queen sorely. Now he watched Queen Rodeswith as she gently made her way through the crowd and stood amongst the peasantry looking in at the door of the judgement hall.

Rodeswith felt comfortable in the cosy jostling huddle. The hairy men grinned sheepishly at her and tugged their forelocks whilst their wives squeezed her hands in theirs. She looked into the hall. King Bořivoj, broad shouldered and long bearded, unchanged since the day she had wed him sat in the high seat, their daughter along side of him. The little girl's rosy cheeks and white forehead shone beneath the dark fringe of her hair. She saw her mother instantly and unleashed that wide ecstatic smile of undisguised adoration that never failed to cut the Queen to the quick. Her father, on the contrary, saw nothing. His thick finger stroke the back of his daughters white neck and his oniony breath fell heavily upon her red cheeks, his other hand tightly gripped hers. The Queen saw a swine trampling on satin sheets.

Her stomach turned, her heart rose into her mouth and her throat was constricted by some awful unspeakable emotion. She knew she could stand this no longer. In a few years more this creature would be the age she had been when King Bořivoj had first taken her to his bed. What would happen then? This thing would not endanger the Bavarian alliance, this thing could supplant her. She returned her daughter's smile as best she could and staggered back into the crowd. An old crone from Chvaly, noting her distress, led her back to the open space where Father Kaich who had also seen her falter, was waiting. Together these two good hearted old people, who could care for her as she could not even care for her own daughter, led her back to her chamber.

When the priest and the old woman had gone Queen Rodeswith examined herself in her granny's mirror. She saw moist red eyes and a brow lined with wrinkles. As she watched she saw a mixture of blood and saliva trickling down from the corner of a trembling mouth. How could she ever hope to compete with her daughter?

Másha covered over the looking glass and taking her mistress by both hands led her to her favourite seat by the window. "Biting your lip isn't going to make anything better, is it now, my lady?" she scolded as she wiped the Queen's face with her handkerchief.

"I used to be so beautiful, didn't I?" Rodeswith sighed.

Másha laughed and kissed her mistress on the forehead. "Less of the used to be, foolish sweetheart," she said as she sat at her feet, "it will be many years before time makes my job even the slightest bit difficult." she put her chin on the Queen's knee.

Rodeswith smiled weakly at her maid, but she felt her strength returning. It wasn't the end yet, she thought, but she would have to take steps soon before things really did get out of hand.

Part Four

One week before Christmas King Bořivoj returned from his morning's hunting to find the Queen awaiting him in the stable-yard. On these occasions it was more usual for him to be met by his daughter, the two of them then going off together in search of breakfast. This day, on seeing his wife, alone and grim faced, she always smiled unless she were ill, he feared the worst.

"Where is she?" he cried, leaping from his horse and glancing anxiously in the direction of the palace, "Is she ill? What's wrong?"

"She's in perfect health," his wife replied, "but I've sent her to pack up her things."

"Pack her things! What for?" The King knotted his bushy eyebrows bewildered.

"We shan't be staying with you in Prague this Christmas." Rodeswith did her best to sound haughty.

"Why ever not?" Bořivoj searched his wife's beautiful face for some clue as to what this might all mean.

"I didn't come to Bohemia to be the woman of some village vlodyka." She almost spat this out, and the grooms and huntsmen did their best to fade away. "If you want to be a real king over all this wide České Žemé then we must spend some of the great festivals elsewhere. If you feel that you need to be here or on the Moravian marches then that is all well and good but the child and I shall be Christmasing at Litvinov, it has been far too long a time since the northerners saw anything of us." She paused to catch her breath and to push a loose strand of hair away from her mouth. "Now if you will excuse me," she continued, "I have a great deal of preparation to do."

She turned imperiously on her heel and strode into the palace. The King looked about him and found that he was completely alone. He stood there for a moment perplexed. A fresh fall of snow had begun. He scratched his beard, as he always did when he did not understand something, and then wandered into the stable to see to his horse.

The groom had already unsaddled the bay and was rubbing her down. "You know, Excellency," he began, as if he were just making small talk, "about this time of year my wife often throws me out of the house when I get home of an evening. I think it's because of the way we spend so much time indoors, what with the weather and the dark and all. They don't get enough time to themselves, and it's only right we should give them a little rein, don't you think, Excellency? The thing to do is not to mope about on the doorstep so as the whole world can see that you've been thrown out. That wouldn't do at all would it?" He glanced at the King, and could not tell for sure if he was listening. "Anyway, Excellency," he went on, "what I always do is to find some useful job. You know, sir, one of those tasks I've been putting off for months but which really needs doing. I usually end up coming back here and looking out all that rotting stitching from the tack box, the stuff that catches your eye whenever your harnessing the horse but never when you're unharnessing it."

The King muttered something under his breath and wandered out of the stable deep in thought.

The groom shrugged his shoulders and began to whisper sweet nothings to the mare.

Later that day King Bořivoj announced to the people that he would be spending Christmas at Strakonice and collecting the outstanding tribute from the upper reaches of the Vltava and the Volynka. It would provide an opportunity, also, to present Prince Spytignev to the vlodykas of those districts. In his absence the King, the King went on, he would send his wife and daughter to the summer residence at Litvinov, as far away as possible from the perfidious clutches of wild Arpad.

Within two days the stronghold at Prague was all but empty as two great trains of horsemen and bullock carts stretched out in opposite directions along the banks of the Vltava.

At Litvinov in the foothills of the Krusné Mountains they were soon snugly installed in the little stronghold that had once belonged to a, now extinct, line of local princes. Frozen streams glistened amongst the juniper glades and the snow lay all about, deep and crisp and even. In all the villages in the district the jangling of sleigh bells alerted the vlodykas to the coming of the Queen as she issued invitations and collected provisions. Stenka and Rastislav had the ancient halls refurnished and Másha and Bertha supervised the cleaning of the house and the preparation of their lady's bed chamber, decking it out with all the Queen's belongings from Prague. Pillows were stuffed with fresh goose down, blankets and mattresses aired in the yard, and tapestries from Prague and Libice hung on the walls. Družynniks searched newcomers entering the stronghold and paid for spies to be sent out into the countryside. The local steward and his wife did not know whether to laugh or cry at the unexpected honour fate had bestowed upon them.

Dunjaska and her little lady tramped through the fresh, deep snow to every one of the peasant huts that lay nearby, distributing sweets and spices to the children and receiving in return eggs and pickled fruits to carry back to the kitchens of the big house. Mountain men followed them home. Great, honest laughing men, neither peasants nor princes but hunters from the high places. They brought their furs as gifts for the Queen and her child. Bear skins and fox pelts. The hides of sleek otters and of gaunt grey wolves. They sat on the floor about the Queen's chair and guilelessly teased her with their tall tales of the chase and of the mountain life. These were the best men in all the wide České Žemé. Mother and daughter sat and listened in wonder, for once unaware of each other's presence. And the sun sank and the fires blazed and the mead flowed and Litvinov was alive and the scent of pine and of juniper sang the little girl to sleep.

God had not yet reached these happy hunting grounds and the young Queen repaid the hospitality she received with stories from the scriptures and of heroes from her own Bavarian home. And she told of the bishops Konstantin and Methodi, and of how they had been sent by the Emperor of the Romans to enslave the King of the Moravians but how, instead they had brought him a God who spoke their own tongue. And she told them of her own family, of Tassilo who defied the Král himself and of Theudelind, the daughter of Garibald, who became Queen of Vlahu. And she told them

what they knew, of the rise of the House of Premysl, and of the Kingdom of Bohemia that had spread across all the wide České Žemé. And she told them of her God, the Lord of Hosts, and showed them her majesty as proof of his all prevailing power. And all of Litvinov agreed that they had never seen a more beautiful and accomplished lady, nor one who could speak so well for herself and for her people and for her faith.

And the gospcká, the little princess? She too won the hearts of the northerners as she went from village to village and ate cabbage soup beside a hundred stoves and chatted with a hundred old wives. Dunjaska, alone, would have been afraid to enter the half of these hovels but the child knew that they had nothing to fear from simple folk, though they might be idolaters, and never were they turned away, or even allowed to leave of their own accord without taking some refreshment with the household. She learnt too, from the mountain men, how to tell the wild beasts from their spore and how to spot where the deer had nibbled at the juniper twigs. This was a forest land, unlike the plains of the Vltava that lay about Prague, and everything here was new, and strange, and magical, and a beauty more terrible than any she had known before lay across the face of the land.

But the mountain winter brought not only the beauty of the ice and snow but also the cold of it all and the dangers which that entailed. Not only were there the hazards brought about by the low temperatures themselves but also the increased chances of death by burning. It was all too tempting to leave the fires blazing the whole night long, when with fewer people up and about the chances of them setting light to the buildings was far higher. During the first week at Litvinov, whilst the husband was sleeping in the Queen's hall, a house in a nearby village caught ablaze. The wife rushed out into the snow, and rolling about in it managed to douse the flames that had been devouring her clothes. Then she had remembered her little ones, asleep within, and returned to die with them in the blaze.

One week before Christmas Dunjaska fell ill. She and the princess had been out all morning and had lunched on beetroot, apples and sour cream with an old pig keeper who had been brought as a prisoner of war from amongst the White Croats as a young lad. On the way back, which

was all up hill, the stitching in one of Dunjaska's boots came undone. Despite several attempts at repairing the damage and constant stops to empty out the slush the nursemaid's leggings became soaked through before they reached home. As a result of this the young woman took to her bed with a severe chill which rapidly turned into a high fever. At first the child sat by her day and night, secretly enjoying this reversal of roles, but when it became clear that Dunjaska was becoming dangerously ill the Queen herself took over the vigil.

Driven away from her nurse's bed the King's daughter wandered disconsolately. She soon exhausted the scope for useful activity within the little stronghold of Litvinov, it was no Prague, and grew ever more bored and anxious. Queen Rodeswith also found these days trying. She too was anxious for Dunjaska's health and this worry was compounded by the loathsome and inescapable proximity of the creature. She felt that in the last two days she had seen more of her daughter than in all the previous ten years put together. The more she saw of that angelic little black and white face the more she felt her own condition deteriorating. Each time she returned to her own chamber and looked in her old grandmother's mirror, which had been brought from Prague amongst her personal effects, she could pick out more and more lines appearing on her face. Her lower lip was noticeable drooping and she felt uncontrollable twitches developing at the corners of her mouth. Másha, with the blindness of true love, denied that this was so and insisted that her mistress was imagining this decline but Rodeswith knew that this was not the case. She felt a terrible weight bearing down upon her as if some giant, unseen, thumb and fore finger were pressing her eyes back into their sockets, her jealousy and hatred compounded by the guilt she felt at allowing herself to be driven so completely by evil. When she was not nursing Dunjaska she felt listless and dirty. And each time she looked in her mirror it told her all the more clearly what she least wanted to know.

At the close of the second day she called Rastislav into her chamber.

"The King's daughter," she began, "Is bored of hanging around the house all day, and what is more she is becoming a nuisance, and getting under everybody's feet."

He smiled. She didn't like that smile, but then she had never liked him. Only her sense of guilt and fear of abusing her position had prevented her from getting rid of him years ago.

"Tomorrow I'd like you to take her out for a ride in the forest. Ever since she started talking to those mountain men she has been wittering on about wanting to see bears and wolves and such in the wild. God knows why, when the rest of us spend our days praying that we shan't. Take her out anyway, and stay out as long as the daylight will allow."

"Of course, Excellency, as you wish." He bowed slightly and leered at her and she could tell that behind that respectable dandy demeanour he was thinking of her as he thought of all women. She wondered why God allowed men like him to survive when so many sweet children died in infancy or, she reflected sadly, were never born at all. For a moment she even felt sorrow for her daughter, but it was only for a very short moment.

She smiled as sweetly as she could, "You can go now, and could you send Másha in to me. Thank you."

He left and when Másha entered the chamber Rodeswith could tell from the look of distaste on her face that their views on Rastislav were very similar. As her maid helped her to undress she felt that the burden under which she had been straining these last days had begun to ease off.

The next morning the royal child dressed up in her fox fur cap, her marten pelt girdle, her wolfskin gloves and her bearskin boots. Bertha wrapped her lynx cloak about the girl's shoulders and walked with her to where her little white pony stood beside Rastislav's horse. The princess mounted, without help, and rode off with her escort into the forest. Her face was flushed with excitement. Perhaps today she would get to see one of those gaunt grey wolves who had serenaded her each night since they had been here as she lay wrapped up snugly in her bed of furs.

All morning they rode up into the mountains. The child pointed out the different spores she had been learning to the servant, but he spoke little. She had never found him a great talker. At mid-day they stopped at a place where a cliff gave them a view over the snow powdered trees and away across the wide wintry České Žemé. They drank some mead and ate honey cakes and bacon rind. Then they rode on deeper into the forest and when the sun began its descent into the West, she wondered if it was still shining upon her grandfather Liutpold.

After a while the child asked Rastislav if they could stop for a while as she needed to get down for a moment. He smiled, almost laughed. She handed him the reins of her pony and slid from the saddle. The snow was deep and soft. She giggled with delight as she sank into it and fought her way around to the back of a pile of brushwood. When she had finished she straightened her skirts and waded back the way she had come. Rastislav was standing there in the snow. The horses were some way off. She looked at his face. It was dark and red and swollen but he was smiling. She expected him to speak but he didn't. He reached out and lifted her fox fur cap from her head and tossed it into the snow. This irritated her a little and she screwed up her face quizzically. He ran his hand through her thick black hair and then let his fingers lightly skim across her cheek. This really did annoy her and she began to frown, but thinking that that would probably be rude she tried to smile instead. She felt his thumb pushing in between her lips and grew frightened. His mouth dropped open and his huge tongue described and moistened its edges. His eyes were no longer the eyes of a man. She tore her face away from his and looked past him to where her pony stood amongst the trees. She saw that it was not tethered and that if she cried out or struggled it might take fright and bolt. If that happened they really would be in trouble. He fell onto his knees in front of her and pushed her over into the deep snow. She felt all her breath leaving her body and tried not to feel his hands as they tugged and pulled at her. She kept her eyes on her little pony and her world turned slowly red and black. She thought of the Holy Lady of Prague and of her mother and once more she could no longer distinguish between them. "Queen of Heaven," she whispered, "have pity on your daughter!", but there was no one to hear her but the gaunt grey wolves.

Part Five

When the King's daughter and her servant failed to return before nightfall the household was not unduly alarmed. It was assumed that the sunset had overtaken them, these were after all the shortest days, and that they must have taken lodging with a neighbouring vlodyka. When noon arrived the following day, however, and there was still no sign of the pair some voices noted concern.

Stenka insisted on being allowed to take a horse and ride out into the hills. He rode from village to village and even stopped at many of the isolated cottages that lay hidden amongst the forest margins. At every dwelling he sought news of Rastislav and his mistress and beseeched the hillfolk to seek for them, but nowhere had they been sighted since the previous morning. At nightfall he returned tired and alone and reported his failure to the anxious court.

When Dunjaska learned that her baby was indeed missing she was inconsolable. She wept hysterically and railed at her fellows for allowing such a thing to happen. This excitement served only to exacerbate the fever which already held the nursemaid in its grip and she suffered a severe and debilitating relapse. Queen Rodeswith sat by her bedside constantly, ministering to her needs, and took comfort in the fact that she could once more enjoy the society of the goose girl who had been such a good friend during her first days in Bohemia. Others amongst the household were somewhat shocked at her apparent indifference to her child's disappearance. Even her own dear Másha seemed a little cooler in the attentions she paid her mistress, but Rodeswith suspected that the girl might be a little jealous of the time she was spending with Dunjaska.

The day after Stenka's vain search, which was Christmas day itself, the whole body of družynniks were sent out to comb the Krusné in search of the little princess. And so it was that the

palace of Litvinov lay virtually undefended when towards evening King Bořivoj himself rode into the courtyard. The old king had finally decide that he could not bear the thought of spending a Christmas apart from his beloved wife and child, whatever any groom might say, and had crossed the whole breadth of the wide České Žemé with his companions to be with them.

When Queen Rodeswith first heard the troop of horsemen entering the stronghold she assumed that it was her own men returning from their quest, and did not stir from Dunjaska's bedside. Within moments Bertha burst into the chamber and alerted her to the true state of affairs. The Queen leapt to her feet and setting her attire in order went into the hall to receive her husband.

The King, red and sweaty from his long ride awaited her. Servants had acquainted him with the events of the last few days. The Queen held her head high and curtsied slightly. Her husband approached her. His face grew darker, his beard was unkempt and his breath reeked of onions. He caught her face in his hand.

"This is a terrible thing you have done to us Niemcovna!" he whispered, and threw her down onto the hard earth floor.

The King's daughter was not recovered, and no sign of her, or of Rastislav, or of their horses was found. Eventually all hope of recovering the child was abandoned and the Royal Household returned to Prague without celebration and with little ceremony. The grief amongst the Queen's companions was compounded by the loss of Dunjaska for whom the arduous of the long overland journey in mid winter had proven too much. She was buried in a shallow grave by the road side. Before the tail of the caravan had passed by the drifting snow had engulfed her tomb.

At Levy Hradec they came upon Father Kaich who was spending Twelfth Night at the shrine of Saint Clement. His sermon sought to compare the birth of the Saviour with the coming of the true faith to Moravia and the adoration of the Magi to the mission of the Bishops Methodi and Konstantin, their teachings and gifts foretelling the vocation of the Slavonic family as those of the Magi had presaged the career of Our Lord.

The following day the old priest accompanied the King and Queen back to Prague and effected some sort of reconciliation between them. He beseeched them to look back over their daughter's short life. It was clear to be seen, in retrospect that she had been too good for this life and too dear to God for Him to allow her to be corrupted by the barbarism that surrounded her. It was obvious that to save her from this terrible fate He had gathered the beloved child into His own embrace. The good Father persuaded the Queen that if she wished to save the families of other pious Bohemian maids from such tragic, though honourable, loss she should found a house in which their daughters might find some comfort and resort from the evils of the world. This resulted in the setting up of a convent at Tettin, not far from Prague. Queen Rodeswith had her father send her some nuns from Regensburg to help in the establishment of this House.

Though King Bořivoj had been truly persuaded of his error in treating his Queen so harshly - he knew in his heart that he had been punishing her for the years of neglecting the child rather than for her carelessness in mislaying her - he could never settle back into his old ways. For him even the most crowded court was empty without the smiling face of his little darling daughter and no music or poetry could ever make him forget how sweet had been the sound of her childish laughter. The stronghold was no longer a home for him, but a constant reminder of his loss. He spent more time marking out the bounds of his kingdom and drawing the other Bohemian princes and vlodykas closer to him.

As for the Queen, she threw herself into the education of Spytigev and Viteslav, determined that under their guidance Bohemia would finally emerge from the barbarism in which she had found it. To the same end she expended much energy on her foundation at Tettin and laid down provisions for her own retirement there should she outlive her lord. In the event of her predeceasing the King she made arrangements that her faithful Másha, whose defection had been more imagined than real, should be received into an honourable place within the sisterhood.

At home in the stronghold she redoubled her efforts to ensure that justice was available to all regardless of station. For her own society she spent more time with Ljudmilla, the cook, whose simple wisdom and years of experience had always guided her. At Másha's suggestion no new goose girl was employed and the Queen and her chambermaid took over the management of the fowl themselves. It gave them a chance to be alone and to escape the demands of the throng without seeming to be shirking employment. For the Queen this duty served as a memorial to her friend Dunjaska, Másha, on the other hand, was reminded of the bedtime conversations she had shared with the little princess, who had always regarded her nurse's vocation as the simplest and purest form of labour.

And the people of Prague? Yes, they too missed the King's daughter but they took pleasure in their memories of her for like the poor the World over they were used to hard times. The peasants of the Vltava valley knew that a memory, which could be reflected upon in solitude or passed on in the telling of tales, was worth far more than any event or experience in the present which would more often than not bring sadness or the promise of hard labour.

Part Six

The King's daughter woke to a tickling sensation at the end of her nose. She tried to move her arm but it felt as if it were trapped beneath heavy blankets. She opened her eyes but it was dark and wet. She sat up suddenly and was dazzled by the sun streaming through the bare branches of the overhanging trees. She saw now that she had been sleeping under a fresh fall of snow. Now that she noticed it, her hands were cold. Where were her wolfskin mittens? Where indeed was her cloak of Lynx fur or her girdle of Marten skin? She remembered that she had lost her fox fur cap, though where and how she could not recall. She tried to stand up, she felt stiff and sore down below. As the snow fell away from her she saw that the middle part of her body, and her legs were covered with blood. She sat and stared for a moment, and then, cautiously, felt around the bloody dress searching for a wound. She could not find one, perhaps it was not her blood?

She tried standing again and this time she managed it. It was now that she realised that her bearskin boots had also gone. Luckily, she thought, she was wearing thick leggings, but this was small consolation. She took a step and felt giddy. Her knees seemed to be made of jelly and she felt as if she had been galloping on her pony all day. Perhaps she had taken a fall? No, it couldn't be that, the worst pain was inside her. She leant against a branch and took deep breaths until the sun and the trees stopped spinning around.

Fresh snow had fallen, of course. She saw that. Nevertheless she could still make out the tracks of the horses. They had been too deep to be completely covered by the night's snow fall. The child brushed a strand of dark, damp hair away from her mouth and discovered that her lips were bruised. She lifted a pinch of snow from the branch she leant on and wet her lips with it. Then, with trepidation at first, she began to follow the tracks down the path.

Whether the stiffness in her thighs eased with exercise or whether she merely grew accustomed to it she knew not, nor did she care. She was more concerned by the thought that she was alone in the forest, and not dressed correctly for the weather. The King's daughter was not, however, as frightened as one might have expected. Judging by the position of the sun she knew that she must have lain out in the snow all night, and the very fact that she had not, during all those long dark hours, been gobbled up by a passing bear or a pack of ravenous wolves seemed sufficient proof that the Holy Lady had not deserted her. Why should She have performed such a miracle, the princess reasoned, only to let her suppliant perish in the snow now?

For some hours the girl followed the signs of her pony's passage, floundering in the deep snow every few paces. Eventually, a little after noon she was frustrated. The path crossed a stream which raced head-long down the mountain side at such a break neck rate that it had resisted all the efforts of the frost to freeze it. It was not so very deep but the child knew that if she got her leggings wet that would be the end of her. She dusted the snow of a fallen log and sat down. She felt so annoyed at herself for being so small and stupid and helpless. Her nose began to run and she wiped it with the back of her hand, automatically looking around to check that the vulgarity had not been observed. Sitting down, though she was getting very cold and tired, was not at all comfortable. She was still very sore down there. At least the swelling on her mouth seemed to be subsiding. She stood up again. The stream would have to be crossed, so she must find a narrower point on it. That would mean going upstream, and up the hill.

Climbing the hill proved a good move as far as comfort was concerned. It meant leaving the path and crawling about under the brushwood. Here there was far less snow, far less wind, and the fact that she was on her hands and knees for much of the time meant that she was putting less weight on her aching legs. Unfortunately she found that her passage through the brushwood coveys and amongst the mountain boulders led her imperceptibly away from the stream. By the time that she noticed that she could no longer hear its gurgling laugh she had no idea in which direction it lay.

On several occasions she had passed by the dark openings of animal burrows. In most cases they were probably the entrances to badger setts but she was tired and alone and not yet eleven years old and her imagination drew more ominous conclusions. And yet as darkness began once more to fall upon the Krusné Mountains the little girl began to consider that perhaps crawling into one of these caves might be wiser than spending another night in the snow. After all, she told herself, had she not been told many stories of children lost in the wild being taken in and protected by animals. And then, just then, she smelt wood smoke!

Slowly she approached the little clearing. Then she stood amongst the trees that marked its limits. She was puzzled, for at first she could not see the house, then she spotted it. It was a long, low, turf mound against which the snow had banked up. In many ways it looked like one of the ancient grave mounds which could be seen throughout her father's kingdom, but it was in a wood sheltering beneath a line of giant oaks. Strangest of all was the wispy column of smoke rising from a small pile of stones, obviously covering a chimney hole, and the small round wooden door.

Quickly thanking the Holy Lady for her providence the child stumbled across the deep snow of the clearing. Shortly before reaching the path that had been beaten up to the door she passed a little spring that, miraculously was bubbling away unfrozen. "I wonder if this is the source of that stream I so carelessly mislaid", she said aloud, startling herself.

Then she reached the door and timidly knocked upon it. There was no reply. She knocked again. Once more no reply. She looked about the clearing. There was no one to be seen, and no animals either, that was queer. She sat down on a stump, obviously intended as a seat, that lay by the door. The door itself did not look as if it were locked but she knew that it was not at all the best of manners to go into somebody's house without permission, especially when you didn't know them. So she sat there and counted her blessings. But she was very very cold, it was getting dark, and the wind was blowing up again. After a while, it might have been an hour, it might have been five minutes, the King's daughter got to her feet, knocked once more upon the door, lifted the latch and entered.

After a moment her eyes adjusted to the smoky dark of the inside of that queer little earth house. She shut the door behind her and moved towards the banked up fire. A few chickens scratched about on the dirt floor and clucked towards her expectantly. Looking about it seemed that the house was made just for her. The bench, the table and the shelves were all at exactly the right height. Here she would not have to stretch for everything in the way that had always vexed and frustrated her in Ljudmilla's kitchen. To one side, the side that lay under the oak trees, their roots took the place of shelves, and along the back wall, lay a long couch covered in furs. The child wearily pulled a skin from this bed and dragged it across to the fire. She sat down upon it heavily and, catching hold of a hen held it against her chest for extra warmth and comfort. As the blood returned to her legs the pain brought tears to her eyes. After a few moments more tears came and then great sobs and she grew annoyed at herself for displaying such a babyish lack of self control. She hid her face in the thick fur and fell asleep.

She slept the sleep of the dead and rose only slowly from the dark pool into which she had sunk. Gradually she became aware of voices, strange voices, excited but low. Course and vulgar they were, and stranger still. As she awakened it seemed to her that they spoke in no real tongue. Though much of what they said was in Slavonic, some strange Chud-like mountain dialect, many words were also in her mother's Niemcy tongue, and more still were in a speech, or speeches, of which she had no notion. Warily she opened her eyes.

Crowded around her in a now much brighter room, they had evidently lit lamps, were seven of the queerest creatures she had ever encountered. Hideous and misshapen little men they were to be sure, though there was nothing untowardly malevolent in their features. Grey skinned and whiskered they were, hump backed or lame, some with an eye half covered by a bony growth or a mouth cruelly twisted in a mockery of mirth. They paused their chatter for a moment as she raised herself on one arm and stared at them.

She was caught between fear and curiosity and could only mutter a silent prayer and stare at them with eyes still thick from sleep. One of the dwarfs pushed his way forward and kneeling beside her held out a cup of broth. She took it from him gratefully and smiled, and that brought them all back to life again. Two of the queer little men began to build up the fire and the others crowded around the little girl. They unwrapped her sodden leggings and, finding her feet still red and frost sore, rubbed them with bear grease. One found her a crust of bread to dip in the warmed up broth. Another picked twigs and chicken feathers from her hair and dress.

Now that she looked down at her dress she saw that it was torn and bloody and seemed to be covered in little bits of the forest that she had brought in to the earth house with her. The dwarfs, noting her dismay, gently lifted the tunic over her head and cast it to one side so that she sat quite naked amidst them. Her first reaction to this disrobing was to draw up her knees and hunch her shoulders, but when one of the little men brought a pail of water that had been warming by the fire over to her side and, with two of his companions began to gently wash her slight white body she relaxed a little. Though they fingered and caressed her in a way with which she was not familiar nor altogether comfortable she could tell from their guileless and timid expressions that they meant her no harm. She was lucky, she thought, not to have fallen in to the hands of murderous thieves or the clutches of wild beasts. These queer little men, for all their unchristian aspect, were at least concerned for her health and welfare.

When they had washed her and rubbed her down before the flames, now licking the earthy ceiling and filling the whole house with a warming brightness, they brought a white wolfskin from the couch and wrapped it, hair side inside, about her shoulders. By this time the dwarfs' own meal was prepared and, leading their pretty little discovery with them, they took their places at the table. They dined on venison and squirrel, blackbread and bear fat, and on haunches of stonebuck from the high mountains. They ate beets and meal mash and cabbage soup and wood-pigeon and honey, and eggs and pickles. The King's daughter was served a bigger portion of everything than any of her table mates and yet even so each of them found some delicacy or choice tit bit on his plate to offer her, and she, out of politeness and gratitude, could refuse nothing. This repast was washed down

with a clear fiery liquor the like of which the child had never tasted before. As her platter eventually began to clear she felt a warmth both within and without her such as only those who have experienced real cold can imagine. Sleep once more began to overcome her and the liquor blurred her mind. She smiled at the dwarfs who lifted her from the table and petted and played with her as she had played with the kittens Stenka had brought to her in the stronghold of Prague. As she tried to remember her home the image of her mother danced before her eyes and she remembered to mouth a silent prayer to the Holy Lady.

The next morning the King's daughter awoke as the dwarfs were preparing to set off for the day. She could see now from the equipment that they were retrieving from a pile by the door that they must be miners, which also explained the dustiness of their clothes which she had noticed the night before. As they pulled on their heavy boots and shouldered their picks and shovels they made it clear that they would return again in the evening and that she should rest herself and not worry about anything. Before they left one or two of them pinched her cheek or patted her black hair. She watched them troop out into the snow and saw the latch drop down into place behind them.

Her feet felt wonderfully rested but the inside of her head was decidedly sore and her mouth felt like the floor of a hen house. She guessed, rightly, that the liquor of the previous evening was responsible. Clambering out from amongst the furs she made her way to the work table by the one small window, glazed with the stomach of some woodland creature, and found a pail of water. She splashed her face and rinsed out her mouth. Looking about, her glance fell on her dress. It really was unwearable. She looked about the cottage for some alternative. In a small chest by the couch she found an old shirt and a flour sack. Putting on the shirt she unstitched the end of the sack and made herself a rough skirt. She then found her own leggings that had been left to dry by the fire and put those on.

Now that she was dressed she found a scrap of bread which she covered with bear fat and honey and helped herself to a very small cup of the spirit. Her fast broken she looked about at the mess left over from last night's meal and set to clearing it up. Melting bucket after bucket of snow by

the fire she brushed all the scraps onto the floor, for the chickens, and washed up the platters and bowls, stacking them neatly on one side, and wiped down the table. Then she hunted out the eggs that had been laid at the back of shelves or in amongst the rubbish in the corners of the room and stood them out on the work table. What she really missed in this kitchen was milk. Apart from a rather old looking round of smoked cheese there was no sign of dairy meat at all, which was hardly surprising, she reflected, when she remembered that she had seen no sign of any livestock. She found some jam though, and at noon she lunched on scrambled eggs and bilberry jam rolled up in a thin slice of stonebuck. After that she settled down for a nap. Towards the end of the afternoon she got up again and began to prepare supper for the dwarfs, so that it would be ready when they came home.

And so it went on. Each day she would rise after the queer little miners had left the house. She would clean up the supper things from the night before, feed the chickens and prepare a meal for the evening. The dwarfs would return bringing with them the creatures that had been caught in the snares they set along the way. Soon after her arrival one of them brought home two brace of moles from which he made her a beautiful little pair of shoes. The pot was supplemented by the offerings that were left for them in isolated groves by the still heathen peasantry of the neighbouring districts. Occasionally they would steal what they could get no other way, like a linen smock for their girl, sometimes leaving a small treasure from their silver mine in its place.

The King's daughter learnt to accept her position, though she could never learn to truly love the hideous little men with their coarse manners and tiresome fondling. She realised that she was being punished for her sinful pride and for neglecting her dear mother who worked so hard for everyone and got so little in the way of thanks. She knew that she too must learn to work hard and to give herself up entirely to labouring for the good of others. Only then would she be rewarded with happiness, if not in this world then for sure in the next one.

She also did her best to improve her new masters' spiritual condition and would keep them late at the table with stories from the scriptures that Father Kaich had inspired her to learn or

with the Märchen that Dunjaska and Bertha and Stenka had told to her. They preferred the Märchen for Bible stories always set them quarrelling about the rights and wrongs of the various issues, about which they seemed to claim certain knowledge as if they had witnessed the events of long ago with their own eyes. Her own favourite amongst the Märchen was the one about the king's daughter who was sent to marry the Král but who ended up tending his geese, comforted only by her old horse's head which was nailed to the gate post she had to pass by each day. She sometimes found herself wishing that she had a horse's head to share her troubles with, but then she would always chastise herself for indulging in such shameful self pity.

Each night, before allowing the little men to undress her and carry her off to bed she always knelt down and prayed to the Holy Lady. She prayed for her mother and her father, and for her brother Spytignev and his mother. She prayed for all her family and friends down there in the wide České Žemé. She prayed for her uncles, Arnulf and Berthold, and for her grandfather Liutpold. She even prayed for the dwarfs themselves in the hope, though she guessed it was vain, that they might one day find salvation themselves.

What the strange creatures themselves thought of all this, and who they imagined she might be talking to, would make a whole story in itself. Perhaps they equated this Lady with whoever it was who caused their child to toss and turn so in her sleep, for if ever they had seen a body hag ridden it was she, and the fact that when questioned in the morning she could remember nothing of any nightmares only served to confirm their theory. Each day before they left the house they warned her of the witch who surely had designs upon her and warned her in no uncertain terms of the dangers of letting anyone at all, however fair they might seem, into the house.

Part Seven

The snows melted and fresh shoots sprang in to life in Bohemia's woods and fields. The long summer came and the harvest was gathered in, and, when the last of the threshing had been completed, the peasants danced and sang long into the night. Autumn came and the green land turned brown and the East winds began to blow. Then came the snows of winter and once more a dark whiteness fell upon the wide České Žemé.

In the stronghold of Prague the old roles were resumed and each worked for the commonwealth as they had done before, but each also knew that there was a hole left in their lives by the loss of the King's daughter. Though folk learned to laugh and love again the dark shadow remained and fell, now on one, now on another, bringing a moment's recollection of the irretrievable past.

The Queen, however, toiled hardest of all to restore her companions' spirits. Always where she was most needed, she worked from before dawn until well after dusk and yet ever finding the time to provide a shoulder to lean on if any of her family and friends were in low spirits or suffering some hardship. Each morning after breaking her fast, when the household was set in motion for the day, she would retire briefly to her chamber. There Másha would arrange her hair and clothing for her appearance in public and she would stand in front of her grandmother's mirror and reassure herself that she was still the most beautiful woman in all Bohemia and that despite her shortcomings and her sins she could win back and retain the love of her husband, the King. "Twenty-seven, after all," she would tell herself almost as often as Másha did, "was not so very old," and now that Spytignev was generally recognised as heir to the throne, her position was quite secure. She

smiled at her reflection and saw all the dreadful wrinkles disappear. She had learnt to turn away quickly at this point, before that flicker of guilt at her complacent acceptance of her child's fate, marred that radiant image.

And so another winter came upon the world and far to the North, beyond the Krusné Mountains where the little penitent piously bore the burden of her exile, a whispering arose beside the hearths of the Daleminzi. For two years now the savage Saxons had borne down in bands upon the villages of the Sorbs and Daleminzi and all their neighbours between the Saale and the Elbe, carrying off their cattle and their women. Now, in the dead of winter, when the danger from Saxon spies was deemed to be at its least the leading vlodykas amongst the Daleminzi gathered together in secret council in the valley of the Flöha. It was a hazardous trysting, the various chieftains trekking for many miles in the thick snow through the virtually trackless hill country to come together. What choice had they though? Unless they banded together and agreed on some joint action they would forever be at the mercy of the ruthless Saxons.

And so, in the bleak midwinter, whilst the King and Queen of Bohemia celebrated Christmas at Prague, a feast marred by the anniversary of their daughter's disappearance, the vlodykas of the Daleminzi solemnly shared what little sustenance remained to them and debated the scant choices the gods had left them. Finally it was decided that they could not stand up to the Saxons alone and that they could not rely on the Sorbs to stand with them, for that people were over-run by traitors and spies who would sell their own brothers. The only course open to them it seemed, would be to send to King Bořivoj of Bohemia, their southern neighbour, and ask him to be their Kneze, and to protect them from the voracious northerners.

A young man, not yet eighteen years of age, a vlodyka's son from the Mülde, Vratislav by name, set out on horseback. He did not travel the accustomed routes, for fear they might be watched, but followed his senses and headed up into the wild mountains where only the eagles and the

stonebucks had been before him. This part of his journey was cold and hard and he led his horse as often as he rode it amongst those high mountain snows. He depended on the way upon the hospitality of those few world wary folk who have taken up their abode in such cruel deserts; outlaws, mystics and those whom no words can describe. And so he came at last to the valley of the Břlína, which led him to the Elbe and thence to the Vltava and to Prague, the stronghold of the King.

It was the end of winter and though snow still lay upon the ground and Rodeswith could still frost over her mirror with her breath the winds of change were in the air. She pulled her cloak about her shoulders and entered the judgement hall. The room was crowded, mostly with the prodigal come for subsidies from the royal granary. Hungry young women whom she knew might be beautiful had they had her advantages smiled trustfully at her, their red faced toddlers clinging to their skirts. She resolved to take the most promising of them under her wing and to send no one away empty handed, even if it meant that she would have to keep a closer eye on Ljudmilla for the rest of the winter. Old peasant men, her hundred uncles, sat about chewing roast pig fat, ready to tell her who was deserving and who was not and a great deal more besides. She smiled at all of them and greeted those she knew best. A child ran out from the crowd and crashed into her legs. She stooped and lifted it into her arms, it was so dirty and over dressed that its sex remained a mystery, and, kissing it, carried it back to its mother. Only then did she take her place beside her husband on the high seat. They clasped hands and she pressed her shoulder against his as the first plaintive of the day stepped forward.

Case followed after case. None were easy to judge and many came near to breaking the Queen's heart. It was always so at this season. As the session drew to a close Rodeswith gazed at the faces around the hall, for the most part those of well known neighbours and servants. Her eyes were drawn back now to a strange face. A face of infinite sadness. The boy who stood lost in melancholy dreaming had come from the North requesting Bořivoj's protection for his people, a request that had readily been granted and vouchsafed by the promise of an expedition beyond the mountains as soon as the snows had gone. Yet still his face was scarred with sorrow, the vacant rapture of a lost soul.

The Queen knew what it was to be young and alone at a foreign court and her heart went out to the young man.

Later as she sat at her embroidery in her bower Rodeswith sent Másha to search out the lad and send him to her. He entered timidly, responding awkwardly to her request that he sit down when she made space for him on her seat. Soon, though, her magic had won him over and she gained his confidence by asking him about his mother and his sisters and his brothers and about the customs of the Daleminzi. Playfully she scolded him for his paganism and extracted a promise from him that he would come with her to talk to father Kaich before he set off home. Still, however, she was puzzled. He still seemed preoccupied with some great burden weighing upon him. And what puzzled her still more, and, she would have admitted it herself, vexed her a little, was that though he obviously had found it no hard thing to trust her and talk with her as he might with one of his sisters he had not, as all the other družynniks had, fallen the least bit in love with her during their interview. Indeed he hardly seemed to notice the beauty that had illuminated all the wide České Žemé through the dark years of Bohemia's birth. So Rodeswith asked the last question that remained to be asked; she asked him of his sweetheart, and he told her all. His face came to life and forgetting himself he took her hands in his and told his story.

He told of how on his long journey from the valley of the Flöha he had spent a night on the bare mountain tops of the cruel Krusné alone, but for his horse, and exposed to all the spite of the weather lords. He told of how, when morning came, he began his descent into Bohemia and of how in the forest there he came upon a little house of earth in a clearing, all but covered by the snow. Desperate for some food and a little warming drink he knocked at the door and was answered by a vision. The most beautiful young girl anyone could ever have imagined had opened the door. Though dressed in the poorest of clothing this girl displayed noble features and the finest manners and spoke as well as the Queen herself. He had begged to be allowed to warm himself by her fire but she, apologising profusely, insisted that the dwarfs who owned the house and who provided for her, had warned her, and commanded her, to let no one cross the threshold for she was, as they assured her, troubled by a powerful witch who might take any form to ensnare her. He pleaded his case

well and persuaded her to bring him mead and food and he sat on the seat outside the door and she waited upon him from within. He had asked her her parentage but she had refused to tell him on the grounds that it would shame her mother and father if it became known to what state she been reduced. And so he had left her and ridden on to complete his mission, but she had never left him and her image even now danced before his eyes.

"And what was she like, this fairy child?" asked Rodeswith, intrigued and just a tiny bit jealous.

"Why, more beautiful than I could ever say," he groped for words, "Her skin was as white as the snow, her cheeks as red as blood and her hair as dark as ... as dark as this wood here in the window frame."

The Queen stood up suddenly as the truth hit her, and her own blood was slow in rising with her; she swayed slightly on her feet. Másha leapt up from her seat and caught her mistress as she fell, and signalled to the boy to leave. Within a moment Rodeswith recovered herself and leaning on Másha's arm walked to the mirror on the wall. A pale frightened face stared out at her and she knew not only that she was no longer the most beautiful woman in Bohemia but also that her daughter was still alive!

That same evening the Queen reminded the King that there were poor and hungry people in every province of the Kingdom and that something must be done to alleviate their suffering. She dared not openly tell him of her discovery of their daughter's survival, remembering the cruel anger that her loss had engendered in him. Instead she offered to ride to the North of the wide České Žemé and suggested that he ride to the South and that they should open up the granaries of the Royal farms in those provinces. King Bořivoj was delighted at this idea and cheered himself with the thought that however careless his wife had proved herself as a mother to her own flesh and blood as a mother to her people she could have no match. Within the week the two trains set out from Prague much as they had done some fifteen months before. The King took Prince Vratislav with him so

that the time could be fruitfully spent planning the spring campaign, and sent out word to his družynniks to prepare for the battle road.

Queen Rodeswith went directly to the palace at Litvinov and sought out the families with whom the Daleminzian boy had stayed in his descent from the hill country. From these and from others amongst the mountain men she discovered the route by which he had come down into Bohemia. Then in the high mountains she came upon wild heathenish folk who knew of a household of dwarfs. By this time the snows had begun to melt and the earliest flowers, snow-drops and their kin, had begun to show themselves.

One morning the Rodeswith told the household that she wished to ride out in the district alone and breathe in the new spring air. She loaded her daughter's best clothes into the panniers of a pack pony and mounting her own pretty grey prepared herself for her mountain adventure. As she rode out of the stronghold Másha caught her stirrup and reminded her in beseeching tones of what had befallen the little princess in those very hills and begged her not to go out alone. The Queen replied bitterly that it was probably precisely because she had not been alone that her daughter had failed to return, and spurred her pony into a trot.

She found her way to the place that the hill folk had indicated surprisingly easily. The carved idols that kept lesser folk away from the groves held no fear for a good Christian like herself. She dismounted next to the spring and, leaving the animals to drink approached the door and knocked.

When the child recognised her mother she knew that a dream had come true and without a moments thought threw herself into Rodeswith's arms. The two of them hugged and kissed and danced for joy in the damp little glade. Then the girl remembered her manners and fetched a cup of slivovic for her mother. The Queen for her part stroked her daughters black hair and recognised that indeed the child was beginning to grow into a beautiful young woman.

The King's daughter laid out an old flour sack on the grass and they sat and ate together. They must have exchanged more words in that one hour than in the all rest of their lives together before. Then the Queen fetched the clothes she had brought from Litvinov and began to wash and dress the girl in readiness for her return. The stolen peasant smock was replaced with a beautiful white dress embroidered with blue and gold dancing horses. A red velvet jacket topped this and, something new, a dark silk sash from the land of the Greeks. A pair of lace up leather boots, the Queen's own lined now with beaver to make them fit, replaced the little moleskin slippers, though the girl asked if she could take these home with her. When the clothing was completed mother and daughter sat down again and the former began to comb and braid the latter's long dark hair. The child chattered away the whole time asking after her father and her uncles and Spytignev, her brother, and Ljudmilla and Bertha, and her mother's Másha, and Stenka and everyone. At last the braid was completed and the Queen coiled it up on the back of the Princess's head and fumbled amongst her own hair for a pin.

"And what about my Dunjaska," asked the child excitedly, "Is she happy with her geese again, or does she miss me?" She laughed.

The Queen found the pin she sought, "The chill she caught last winter, before you got lost, it carried her off." She stuck the pin into place.

The girl gasped, caught her breath and fell back lifeless into her mother's lap.

Queen Rodeswith sat there for a good long while stroking her daughters hair and cheeks. She did not hear the birds singing in the woods nor did she hear the babbling of the spring, nor the tearing at the succulent new grass of her animals' teeth. The sun began to sink down towards Bavaria and somewhere, far off, an animal barked liked a dog.

What the Queen did hear were the uncouth voices of the dwarfs as they tramped back from their silver mine. Looking up she beheld their hideous figures on the path and was transfixed with

fear. She dropped her child's head onto the sack cloth and ran in terror to her mount. Pulling herself into the saddle she galloped off just as the little men, sensing some tragedy burst into the clearing. They saw their girl laid out on the lawn and they saw the strange lady riding away and they knew that the witch had finally cheated them out of their treasure.

All that night the dwarfs tried to coax life back into those dear lips but to no avail. Still, when morning came, they could not bear to bury her, and stretched out her body on the turf roof of the house leaving one of their company to watch over her while the others set off for work.

Part Eight

As the snows began to melt with the coming of the west wind to the wide České Žemé King Bořivoj turned back towards his stronghold of Prague. Already the various vlodykas and daring družynniks to whom he had sent out the war arrow were there before him, eager to ride north to win fame and glory in armed contest with the Saxons. Vratislav the Daleminzi rode at his side, happy at last to be bringing succour to his kinsfolk.

At the young northerner's suggestion the King did not lead his company out of Bohemia through the Elbe gap, for such a well-known passage was certain to be watched by spies and traitors. Instead Vratislav revealed to his new lord the obscure mountainous paths by which he had come down into the wide České Žemé. To be sure it was not solely a fear of spies that prompted this choice in the boy. Though he would barely admit it, even in his own secret counsel, he hoped that perhaps he would come again upon the beautiful child who had stolen his heart in the high mountains. Perhaps seeing him accompanied by the King and his Druzhina she would believe that he was no witch and consent to come home with him and be his bride.

Though the cavalcade passed close by to Litvinov where the Queen was wintering King Bořivoj refused to visit the place, it held too many bitter memories of the loss of his daughter. And so young man and old rode on in silence at the head of the column as it wound its way upwards into the Krusné Mountains each one preoccupied with thought of the girl in whom he had set his hopes.

Never before had a prince of the line of Premysl of Prague ridden up into these mountains at the head of his warband. Each village or farmstead they entered they found deserted by the simple hill folk. The people were scarcer than the deer themselves and many of the soldiers amused themselves in riding down the game in the pathless woods. Here and there carved idols would

be found, or as often as not merely an ancient tree with a hideous face cut into its trunk, and these the King, jealous for his new faith, would have torn down or disfigured with fire. And so it was that they came to that high grove where Vratislav had sipped his first cup of Bohemian mead.

The small garden that the King's daughter had planted before the earth house was now in full bloom and the spring gurgled with joy as, free of ice at last, it gushed forth and watered the mossy lawn. The riders from the low lands saw none of this. On entering the clearing both Bořivoj and his young ward each, at once, saw the prostrate form lying atop the turf roof. The King leapt down from his saddle and ran to his daughter's side.

God had not deceived his eyes. This was his beloved child. A year or more lost and yet here she lay as fresh and sweet as any day he had seen her. Catching her up in his arms he called her by name and pressed her lips to his, believing she would wake and recognise him. At that moment the most hideous little creature imaginable ran shrieking from the shadowy bole of the nearest oak tree and caught hold of the King's elbow. Prince Vratislav who had followed Bořivoj onto the roof drew his sword and struck off the monster's head. The trunk jerked and writhed upon the green as the head tumbled down from the roof still yelling abuse and obscenities until it rolled into the silencing depths of the fountain.

The King ordered that the troop should turn about and ride down to Litvinov. As they retraced their tracks, Bořivoj cradling his daughter's body in his arms, the young Daleminzi told of how he had come upon the girl when first he passed that way. Then she had refused to reveal her parentage but her conduct had proved her to be a true princess, and how, not knowing how presumptuous he was being, he had determined to return and take the child for his wife. Tears ran down the older man's red face and grey beard and he covered the unmoving features of the girl with salty kisses.

In the palace at Litvinov the Queen's household were overcome with joy at the coming of the King and at the recovery of their little lady, but this joy turned to anxiety and then dread when it became apparent that though the child had returned she was no longer accompanied by life. The Queen took herself off to the chapel and knelt night and day before the altar whilst the women of her chamber wept by her daughter's bedside. Father Kaich performed the last rites over the slight white body and orders were given for the corpse to be prepared for burial.

Ljudmilla, the old cook, came from her kitchen, for no one wished to eat, to help Bertha and Másha in their sorrowful task, and immediately demanded that the King should be brought to the chamber.

"Dear lord," she cried as soon as he entered, "what kind of fools are you taking your counsel from these days. I've worked in your kitchens, and your father's, for the past thirty or forty years, and I should wonder if I didn't by this time know more about dead flesh than any other soul in all this wide České Žemé, and this poor child isn't made of it. Now I'm no doctor, and I'm certainly no sorcerer," this last was not entirely true, "so I can't tell you how to go about awakening our dear little lady but I can swear on all I hold holy that putting her down in the black earth will slay her for sure."

The King stared at her for a moment and then, leaning over the bed, pulled open his daughter's lips. Holding his face against hers he placed his wide nostrils over her tiny mouth and sniffed deeply, two or three times. "God save you woman," he said quietly to the old cook, "it's true. You," he looked across the bed at Másha, "run and tell her mother, and you," he touched Bertha who knelt beside him, "prepare a litter for my daughter, we leave for Prague tonight."

And so it was that the royal family was gathered again in the stronghold of Prague in the early spring. The child lay unmoving on her bed, fed, by Bertha, with a series of mead based infusions especially prepared by the wise woman Ljudmilla. Queen Rodeswith spent every hour of the day and night punishing herself for her sins before the image of the Holy Lady in Father Kaich's church, kept alive only by the persistent love and ministry of her faithful Másha. The King carried out

his duties as best he could but spent much time demanding to know why there was no man in his kingdom who could tell him what ailed his child or who could restore her to health. And the boy Vratislav? His burden was heavy indeed. His love for the girl had encouraged him to forget his mission and return to Prague with his new friends. There news had now reached him that the cruel Saxons had got wind of King Bořivoj's plans and that they had sent troops of horsemen into the land of the Daleminzi and that all the leading vlodykas had been hunted down and slain, his own father and uncles amongst them. No doubt even now his own dear sisters, of whom he had been so fond, were being marched across the Niemcy Land to the slave markets on the shores of the sea. Now the poor orphaned boy sat by the only love he had left and watched her staring lifelessly at the high roof beams of the palace of Prague.

When none could be found to heal the girl in all the wide České Žemé word was sent to the Bavarian Land. Doctors sought out King Bořivoj's court from the Regensburg, from Liutpold and his Bishop and from each of the abbots, but to no avail. They came from Passau, but could do nothing. Prince Berthold came from Salzburg with the doctors of that proud city. These clever men also could bring no sign of life to the child's form. Some advised that they should stop feeding her and mercifully allow her to join the company of angels.

When young Berthold heard this last suggestion he raged at the doctors, asking them whether it was not enough that they could not awaken his niece that they should also wish to condemn her to death. He ordered his horse to be saddled and swore to the king that he would ride without rest to Carinthia to seek out his brother Arnulf, for if there was a man amongst the Bavarians who might find them a doctor who was anything more than the merest quack then it was he.

The son of Liutpold leapt into his Avar saddle and galloped out of the gates of the stronghold of Prague. Up along the course of the Vltava he rode and over the mountains into the Eastern marches of Bavaria. He crossed father Donau by the ferry which brought him ashore at Lorch. Here he paused briefly to light a candle for the soul of his dear niece, to drink the health of the

Bishop of Passau and to change his horse. Then he rode up the gorge of the wild rushing Enns into the high barren wastes of Styria until at last he found himself in the heart of the Prince Arnulf's warrior realm, at the gates of the mighty Karnburg.

The King sat by his daughter's bed. The princes Spytignev and Vratislav sat across from him. None spoke. Iron shod hooves clattered on the cobbles outside. Stenka came into the chamber and whispered in King Bořivoj's ear. Wearily the sad old man arose.

Outside Prince Berthold, red eyed and unshaven, stood clutching his horse's rein. He bowed slightly as his brother-in-law approached. Behind the Bavarian a southern youth helped an old man from the saddle of a grey mare. This old man, seeing the King, bowed stiffly from the waist. Bořivoj could not make out his face beneath the wide brim of the battered hat which he wore. Bertha brought a horn of milk for Prince Berthold. He moistened his mouth and indicated that she should offer it to his companions.

"Brother Bořivoj," began the Bavarian lordling, "this old man is the chief surgeon from my brother's hospital at Maria Saal. He has studied in Vlahu and amongst the Greeks and has practised medicine since his youth. We will find no better doctor this side of the city of Constantine."

The King stepped forward and addressed the aged doctor, "Welcome friend, to our stronghold of Prague. If you can restore my daughter to life you may name your reward, if you fail, then, many others have before you and we shall not begrudge you your board and passage back to Carinthia if you wish it. So come now what is your name."

"The doctor is without speech," explained Berthold, the lad here translates his hand signs for us."

King Bořivoj was taken aback, the infirm had always made him uneasy. "Well then you had best eat and drink, all of you, I shall have the girls prepare the child for examination." He turned away into the building and the doctor and his boy followed.

Prince Berthold waited in the yard a moment, removing his effects from his saddle. As he let the grooms lead the animals away he caught sight of Másha crossing the yard and called out to her. She turned and waited for him to catch up. "My sister?" he asked, noticing the lines of worry that had begun to spread across the girl's face. She indicated the Church, to which she had been walking and together they sought out Queen Rodeswith.

After he had eaten and washed himself the old man and his assistant entered the living tomb in which the King's daughter slept open eyed and unbreathing. The young princes had been driven out and only the King and the serving women remained. The child lay in a simple shift on top of the covers.

The doctor bent over and listened at her mouth, he felt the temperature of her brow, her fingers and toes and in the pits of her arms. Then he gently felt her limbs, testing the articulation of her joints and the firmness of her flesh. Eventually, after nearly an hour of examination he sat down on the stool that Bertha had brought for him and began to explain his diagnosis to the boy. It was evident to the King that this was no simple explanation and that both master and servant were being tested to the limits of their ingenuity in expressing his daughter's condition in motions of the fingers. He could see the frustration and agony on the old man's face as he tried to speak his message when the boy seemed to be failing in his task, and was repulsed by the horror of it all.

At long last the doctor nodded to his lad and the boy taking a deep breath began to explain. "Lord King, my master says, if I understand correctly," he glanced at the old man, who nodded encouragingly, "that the princess' condition is one brought on by fear or shock or excessive

grief come suddenly. What has happened is that all the tension has gone from her sinews and tendons so that her limbs are like the strings of an old harp left untuned in the loft over the summer."

"So what can be done, can he restore her?" The King demanded to be told.

"Yes, my Lord, my master believes we can retune her," he glanced once more at the doctor for encouragement, and received it, "as with the harp strings the young lady's sinews must be tightened."

"And how must we do this?"

"We must tie ropes to her ankles and her wrists and pull them as tightly as we can without breaking the skin. If we do this, as I understand it, the sinews of the limbs will exert their own pull on those in the other parts of the body."

And so it was arranged. For stakes were driven into the floor of the chamber and ropes were wound about these. The one end of each length of rope was then bound about the correct part of the child's body and four sturdy družynniks were called in to pull upon the other ends.

The doctor hovered above the girl's body as the warriors tugged, gently at first, but then at his mute admonition harder and harder still. All the while he watched where the ropes tugged at the limbs and ran his hand up and down the soft flesh. Gradually the King was able to make out that the muscles were becoming firmer under the doctor's touch and that colour was returning to that pale skin.

The doctor held up his hand.

"Stop!" Cried boy and king as one.

The ropes slackened.

Hurriedly the old doctor and his assistant undid the knots that bound the King's daughter. She yawned, and turning over buried her face in the pillow.

The King rushed forward in delight but the doctor caught him before he reached the bed and held a finger to his twisted lips.

"Let her sleep, Excellency, she will have gained no refreshment from her unnatural stupor." The boy whispered.

King Bořivoj looked down at his sleeping daughter and saw the trace of a smile creep across her slumbering face. He smiled and embraced both the doctor and his boy.

"Now tell me sir," he asked, "who are you and how you came here?"

The boy looked at his master's face and the latter nodded. "My master is a Greek, Excellency, and he goes by the name of Konstantin Konstantinou."

"I've heard that name."

"My master was present at the birth of your Excellency's daughter." He nodded at the child whom Bertha had now covered with a blanket.

"Of course, I remember him now, but he could speak then, what happened?"

"Master Konstantin's tongue was removed by Prince Arnulf ten years or more ago."

"For what crime?"

"As a favour, Excellency, to his sister. The Lady Rodeswith."

"The Queen?" The King cried astounded.

"My mother could not order something so horrible!" All eyes turned to the child who had for some moments been quietly listening to the exchange. "After all was it not her who came and sought me out in my forest prison and rescued me."

"No, indeed," cried the King clasping his baby to his breast, "it was Prince Vratislav who led me to where you lay slain in the grass."

"No father dear, it was my mother, we sat on the grass and talked and she had brought me fine clothes."

The King's face darkened as he saw the truth, she had been wearing the Greek sash he had given to his wife only weeks before, but he hugged his daughter closer and thanked God that she, at least, had been saved for him.

The wedding of Vratislav, the King's foster son, and the King's only daughter was celebrated in the great hall of the stronghold of Prague. The King sat alone in the high seat and his daughter and son-in-law sat opposite in the seat of honour. Food and drink was distributed with matchless largesse. Musicians played and jugglers performed; all Bohemia was enraptured. Their darling princess had returned from the dead and was to marry a brave young Slavonic warrior.

At last the time came for the crowning performance of the evening. Four strong warriors carried a shrouded bear cage into the hall and set it down over the glowing hearth in the centre of the floor. A champion fiddle player from amongst the Huns stood up and slowly and softly began to play. Fresh fuel was cast upon the embers and the shroud was removed from the cage. Still beautiful, and less than thirty winters old, Queen Rodeswith stood there upon the tin floor. Her plain tunic was torn and dirty and her long hair hung loose about her. Her bare feet moved uneasily on the warm metal. As the flames rose she hopped more rapidly from one foot to the other as the cool eyed Hun watched closely and timed his tune to her dance, and the court laughed at her discomfiture.

Now some say that at this point the Princess Dragomira, for so the child was named, leapt to her feet and called a halt to this cruel torture. They say that mother and daughter were truly reconciled and that the fair Rodeswith left Prague to her child and took the veil at her own convent of Tettin, and with it the monastic name of Ljudmilla, after her faithful cook. The love which she had denied her own child she repaid in the attentions she was to lavish on her famous grandson Venceslav. Others, however say that the nun Ljudmilla was the mother of Spytignev, or even that

Bořivoj himself married the old cook, who had, after all, saved his daughter's life. These say that at her wedding feast Dragomira laughed loudest of all and that as the flames rose higher and higher and as the fiddling grew faster and louder Rodeswith, once Queen of Bohemia, danced faster and faster until, eventually, overcome with exhaustion and pain, she collapsed in a heap and the hot tin floor scorched away her face and breasts as her gown and her long brown hair burst into flames. Who can say with which telling the truth lies? The tale of bygone years is not yet at an end and may God preserve us all from the terrors of this World.